Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

72 | Spring 2019
Special Issue: Elizabeth Spencer

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OpenEdition Journals

**Electronic version**
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2482
ISSN: 1969-6108

**Publisher**
Presses universitaires de Rennes

**Printed version**
Date of publication: 1 June 2019
Number of pages: 107-127
ISSN: 0294-04442

**Electronic reference**
Gérald Préher, "(Re)visiting the Past: Elizabeth Spencer's Marilee and the Short Story Composite", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 72 | Spring 2019, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 04 May 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2482

# (Re)visiting the Past: Elizabeth Spencer's Marilee and the Short Story Composite

Gérald Préher

1 As a genre, the short story has been compared to both poetry and the novel. For William Faulkner, "next to poetry, it is the hardest art form"[1]; Elizabeth Spencer elaborates on this idea when she declares: "I think of a short story as being related to poetry or short pieces of music . . . . It expects of you more perfection because it is shorter. It comes in for closer scrutiny" ("A Conversation" with Weaver 52, 53). That both writers should see the short story in relation to poetry, a genre that depends on structure, rhythm and sound, shows that short forms require more attention or thought because they ask for more concentration, also, from the reader. Whereas a novel might be remembered for moments, a short piece revolves around a single illumination that can have many repercussions within and without the actual text. Indeed, as Norman Mailer suggests, "a short fictional piece has a tendency to look for climates of permanence—an event occurs, a man is hurt by it in some small way forever." Mailer also believes that "[a] novel can be created out of short stories only if the point in each story is consecutively more interesting and incisive than the point before it, when the author in effect is drilling for oil" (79). The image Mailer uses implies a progression from one story (or chapter) to the next so that it may widen and deepen the scope of the book's opening. Whether or not Mailer was aware of it when he wrote those words in 1998 (originally, in a review of Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*), he comes very close to the classic definition of short story cycles, which Forrest Ingram defined as "*a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts*" (19, original emphasis). A number of Faulkner's novels derive from short stories, and it seems that he did find oil when putting together, among other major novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* (see Pothier). However, he also wrote consistent short story sequences[2]—*Go Down, Moses*; *The Unvanquished* and, to a certain extent, *Knight's Gambit*—linking stories he had published in periodicals that

shared a driving theme and recurring characters, and making the final product, according to Malcolm Cowley, "something more than a mere collection" (7).

2 Like Faulkner, a number of gifted short story writers have found ways to use their talent and present tales which, once gathered in a single volume, give the impression that they constitute some kind of complete narrative and may thus be situated at the crossroads of two genres—the short story (collection) and the novel. Already in the 19th century, the publication of novels that had previously been serialized was widespread: to keep the reader's attention, the end of each installment would create suspense so that the public would purchase the next episode.[3] With the short story cycle, it is much more difficult to keep the reader turning the pages since, quite often, the texts that make up such a set come out in more periodicals than one before being collected together—when they actually are. As a matter of fact, it seems that stories published this way frequently end up in novels—Richard Ford released several Frank Bascombe stories which were later incorporated into the volumes of his quartet[4]; Shirley Ann Grau had no less than three stories out before integrating them into her debut novel *The Hard Blue Sky*; Joan Williams wrote two stories that made their way into her first novel *The Morning and the Evening*; John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Don DeLillo and many others have, upon several occasions, published sections of their forthcoming novels in the guise of stories . . . What results is a trend it is tempting to call, along with Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, "the composite novel" for such books "emphasize[] the integrity of the whole" as opposed to short story cycles that "emphasize[] the integrity of the parts" (5).[5] A quick look at the aforementioned works is enough to suggest that they present episodes which are organized and complete, whole, although, as is the case in most short stories, a lot remains left out and blanks can often be seen on the pages. The reason, as Charles May puts it, is that "unlike chapters in a novel, which tease you with the illusion of continuity, short stories are always ending. And often those conclusions —one of the form's most important aspects—are frustrating in their inconclusiveness" ("The American Short Story" 300). Writers who publish sections of their novels as short stories need to flesh out those shorter texts so that they may find a place in a greater work—not as fragments but as stones in a bigger edifice whose façade will hide the possible cracks or crevices.

3 Elizabeth Spencer published many interconnected stories but hardly ever collected them in a single volume. She did, like previously mentioned authors, let out pre-texts to longer works—notably *The Night Travellers*—but she has also left some interrelated stories to form, within her readers, "parts of a novel that will never get written," as she once declared in an interview with David Hammond. Brought together, such stories would illustrate what Joanne V. Creighton or Rolf Lundén call "short story composites"—independent stories that are nonetheless interrelated—and constitute sets. For Lundén, the use of the expression "short story composite" "points to a work of art that combines several separate pictures" (14) and that "ends not with closure but with a story or sketch that takes off in a new direction" (18). Two sets (or composites) stand out when looking at Spencer's body of work: those revolving around Marilee and those focused on Edward Glenn. This contribution will analyze the Marilee stories: "A Southern Landscape" and "Sharon," first featured in *The New Yorker*, ten years apart, and "Indian Summer," published in *The Southern Review* some eight years later. In a way, these texts make up a *short* short story composite, a set, and Spencer commented

on them several times—she did have other ideas, which never materialized into additional texts:

> [Marilee] has some other stories to tell in addition to [those three]. One is about Uncle Andrew, how he came to leave Port Claiborne and move to Illinois; there was some kind of trouble he got into, maybe of a romantic nature . . . Then Melissa, what went on about her after Uncle Hernan died. Maybe more. It's hard to say. (Foreword 8)[6]

4 It should be noted that Spencer made one major modification to "Sharon" before collecting it in *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* for the sake of coherence within her Marilee stories: in the pages of the *New Yorker*, the reader finds out that "Uncle Rex . . . has died when a boy" ("Sharon," *New Yorker* 38)—a fact that would not make his presence in "Indian Summer" possible. As Ingram suggests, and Spencer's set illustrates, "[a] story cycle . . . is a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit" (15). Although she had not initially planned a third story, it seems that Marilee's voice made itself heard again, bringing the South back into Spencer's production at a time when she had started writing stories set in Canada and did not feel quite at home there.

5 The three stories were only collected once in book form and Spencer was not the one who initiated it: "The three Marilee stories are reprinted from the collection, *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*. The year it came out, I got a call from the University Press of Mississippi suggesting such a small collection."[7] When they are featured in other collections, they are never next to each other—they always appear in the order they were published, which does not match the chronology of the plots: "A Southern Landscape" focuses on Marilee's adolescence, "Sharon" on her childhood and "Indian Summer" on her life as a young woman. Rather than introducing continuity, Spencer thus favors discontinuity, a typical feature of the composite, according to Lundén (18),[8] as if she meant the readers to feel Marilee's comforting presence when they unexpectedly reunite with her. As the stories are scattered throughout Spencer's collections, Marilee becomes a haunting, yet familiar voice whose company one cannot fail to notice. Charles May observes that "there is a certain pleasure involved when you read a story in a collection and run across a character you have met previously. . . . these characters actually live outside the fictions in which they exist and have been hanging around just waiting for another story in which to pop up" ("The American Short Story" 315)—a comment which echoes Spencer's who seems to consider Marilee as a *real* person.

6 Marilee is undoubtedly a figure of the author, but Spencer uses her as an intermediary between her own self and the South—she travels with her through space and time, revisiting or discovering places she knew or heard about when she was younger.[9] The interest of the three stories lies in the idea of border crossing since the eponymous character, just like Spencer at the time she was writing, is a native Mississippian living in Canada.[10] It is thus a dual crossing, literary and geographical, that shows the originality of Spencer's endeavor. In addition, the reader's knowledge of a set of characters as s/he discovers the second and third stories makes the act of reading a participative experience.

## "A Southern Landscape": The Story of a Heart

7 Spencer traces Marilee's origin back to a voice that she heard and "[t]he time it started talking was right when [she] needed to hear it" (Foreword 6). She had just moved to Canada and was finding it hard to cope with the change. Marilee was the voice inside her heart that kept her mind away from the new lifestyle she had to force herself to get used to; she "knew that this voice was welcome to stay for as long as it wanted to" (Foreword 7). In numerous interviews, Spencer commented on the significance of Marilee as a character, making it clear that

> She's definitely not myself. Her voice, her attitudes, the kind of things she was born into—none of these parallel anything in my life. I do feel close to her, though—not as a friend but as a kind of shadow that I didn't leave. She's a kind of alter ego. Marilee continues my other life. *If I had stayed in Mississippi* and not become a writer, I think I would have been like Marilee, content or discontent in a Mississippi way . . . ("A Conversation" with Broadwell and Hoag 57, my emphasis)

8 The truth is Marilee also left Mississippi, as she explains at the end of "A Southern Landscape": "Millions of things have happened; the war has come and gone. *I live far away*, and everything changes, almost every day" (52, my emphasis). The discrepancy between the writer's comments and the character's remark is obvious. In fact, what really makes Spencer different from Marilee is that she became a writer while Marilee remains a creation of her mind: "when she started talking, she wasn't like a character *in* the story. She *was* the story" ("*Postcripts*" 110). When the University Press of Mississippi decided to print the Marilee stories in a separate volume, the emphasis was obviously on story as the collection's title indicates: *Marilee: Three Stories*. Nevertheless, if Spencer meant to dissociate Marilee from herself, the title of her 1998 memoirs points in another direction: "landscapes of the heart" are the last four words of "A Southern Landscape" and, even though the title was suggested to her,[11] the decision to keep it turns the character into a fictional double. Marilee's words constitute a threshold[12] leading into Spencer's own story,[13] thus making the two inseparably connected.

9 Marilee is the narrator of three stories each of which is concerned with different people —only her mother appears in all of them. As Karen Evoy observes, "[w]hat draws the Marilee stories together despite their wide separation in time . . . is their shared setting, characters and thematic concerns" (569). In "A Southern Landscape," Marilee focuses on place, as the title shows; she starts out inviting the reader to follow her on her way home: "The name of the town, in case you're trying your best to remember and can't, is Port Claiborne, Mississippi. Not that I'm *from* there; I'm from *near* there" (41, original emphasis). The visit is initiated by a reference to her hometown in the newspaper that stimulates Marilee's memories[14] and, as the use of the second person pronoun makes clear, the reader is encouraged to become an active participant in her journey into the past. Should the readers lose their way, they are told to ask for "the Summerall place": "Everybody knows us" (42). Place and self are one, as the metonymy implies, and Marilee's directions show how much she wants to let the reader in.

10 The first character to be named is Marilee's primary focus here and he is also related to her specific memories of place. She initially calls him Benjy Hamilton, after Faulkner's Benjy Compson, for to her, "he certainly did behave like an idiot" (43). However, once the point has been made, she reverts to his actual name, Foster, and goes on to explain that one night he took her to the ruins of Windsor and kissed her. Since then, Windsor

has held an important place in her heart and she considers it a "sure terrain," "standing pure in its decay" (52). The description she makes of the place is very detailed and there again she uses the second person pronoun, inviting the reader to picture the scenery (45). She is also very concerned about the effect of time on the ruins as she sees it working on herself: "What Nature does to Windsor it does to everything including you and me—there's the horror" (46). Nonetheless, she admits that going back to the site makes memory survive and helps her re-create everything. This way, her wanderings with Foster remain part of "the most wonderful night" (45) of her life.

11 Marilee's relationship with Foster is presented as rather complicated and, even though she is aware that "his reputation was not of the best" (47), she is quite protective of him —her jealousy shows when one evening she spots him in the street with a blonde, but her hard feelings are soon forgotten when he invites her out to the high school senior dance. That evening does not turn out the way Marilee intended it to, but still, she remembers her initial feelings fondly: "There was never anybody in creation as proud as I was when I first walked into the senior dance that night with Foster Hamilton" (48-49). Writing his name in full amounts to conjuring up an image of Foster and, since he was described earlier writing her name down on paper—the first time it is revealed to the reader (44)—it seems that their union can only be achieved through words and story-telling.

12 Marilee's memories are as finely knit as a cobweb: each episode leads into another, thus creating a coherent whole. For example, when she presents the Summerall place, she recalls "two or three marble holes out near the pecan trees where [she] used to play with colored children" (42). It is thanks to this reference that Foster is first introduced for he "swore he twisted his ankle in one of those same marble holes . . . " (42). Yet, according to Marilee, he "was more than likely drunk and so would hardly have needed a marble for an excuse to fall down" (42). Through a kind of mirror effect, Marilee thus introduces Foster using an excuse he himself has provided. Her goal is to pave the way for a later episode involving drinking which earned Marilee herself quite a reputation. Indeed, on the night of the high school senior dance, soon after they arrived, Foster fell into the gully "that had eroded right up to the borders of the campus" (49), causing the two of them to disappear for a while. Marilee's description of the sight is reminiscent of the occasion upon which she met Foster, namely her winning a prize for an essay on the siege of Vicksburg. Foster, who was working for the paper in Port Claiborne, came to interview Marilee and they somehow became close. Remembering what she saw in the gully, Marilee tries to justify how she handled the situation and there, too, the Civil War comes into play:

> What I should have done, I should have walked right off and left him there till doomsday, or till somebody came along who would use him for a model in a statue to our glorious dead in the defense of Port Claiborne against Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in 1863. That battle was over in about ten minutes, too. But I had to consider how things would look—I had my pride, after all. So I took a look around, hiked up my skirts, and went down into the gully. When I shook Foster, he grunted and rolled over, but I couldn't get him up. I wasn't strong enough. Finally, I said, "Foster, Mama's here!" and he soared up like a Roman candle. I never saw anything like it. He walked straight up the side of the gully and gave me a hand up, too. (49)

13 Foster appears as a fallen hero in a battle that was comically short. By using her knowledge of the Civil War, Marilee asserts her identity as a Southerner and turns the situation into a performance, which could have led to reflections on the notion of

heroism. Instead, Marilee took the lead and became Foster's unsung heroine, driving him back home even though she did not have a driver's license at the time. Taking control when men have failed them is one of the ways Spencerian women assert their power even if it often means, as is the case here, that they have to do away with their feelings and give up on the one they love. As Spencer has explained, "we must take the good with the bad. But the performance of the thing is what [Marilee]'s really talking about in her own little way . . ." ("Elizabeth Spencer at Sycamore Fair" 44). The character's exploration of the past follows her train of thought, and her decision to start out with memories of Foster helps her formulate her attachment to the South. To a certain extent, she, too, could utter Quentin Compson's final words in *Absalom, Absalom!*—"I don't hate [the South]!" (303)—as each of her discoveries brings her closer to the Southern heart of darkness.

## "Sharon": Placing the Dark Other

14 Very much like Quentin, in "Sharon," Marilee has to make sense of a typically southern evil: miscegenation. In this story, she explores the past further by taking the reader to her Uncle Hernan's place. From the outset, an aura of mystery pervades the atmosphere—the place is "surrounded by thick privet hedge, taller than a man riding by on a mule could see over" (283)—but Marilee knows that there is "a gap in the fence" that "was arranged . . . in such a way that dogs and people could go through but cows couldn't" (284). As one of the people who uses this gap as a short cut into Hernan's property, Marilee intends to show the reader/visitor what might not otherwise be seen. Following the same pattern as in "A Southern Landscape," she gives the reader directions to the eponymous house: "a little way down the road [from us], if you took the road; across the pasture, if you didn't" (283). It takes a page to find out the narrator's identity and, this time, it is Marilee's mother who reveals it to the reader.

15 Marilee is on her way to Uncle Hernan's for dinner and there is a protocol on such occasions because he is "a gentleman" (283): she has to be "cleaned up, in a fresh dress, and wearing shoes" (283). Sharon is "a house that expected behavior" (284) and, for that reason, Marilee has to follow a code. Her uncle being a creature of habit, she is "careful . . . to do things always the same way" (286). This repetitive pattern is also made clear through the use of adverbs such as "always" and "never," and through the use of "would,"[15] which, again, emphasizes what was expected of Marilee at the time and has since become myth. According to Charles May, "Many, perhaps most, short stories present characters . . . overwhelmed and enthralled by something within or without them which they invest with mythic rather than logical significances" ("Unique Effect" 292). In Spencer's story, going to Sharon is presented as a ritual that eventually resembles a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood or, to narrow down the focus, from innocence[16] to awareness.

16 Uncle Hernan's world is obviously very ordered and manners are important. Marilee has been careful, while introducing the place, to refer to the Southern past: she has pointed out that the house "had been built back before the Civil War" (284); that in the parlor, "the Negroes had worn a path to the window, coming there to ask him things" (285)—an odd comment since one would expect servants to come only upon request—; and that his maid, Melissa, a black woman, was "his heart of hearts" (286). Melissa had been Hernan's wife's maid and, when Aunt Eileen passed away, she stayed at Sharon, in

a separate cabin decorated in a way reminiscent of Eileen's tastes and style. Marilee is not analytical in her description of Melissa's place, but the reader might feel that the maid has replaced her mistress by copying her—something the narrator mentions without further comment.[17] As is to be expected in the reconstructing South, black and white people live separately and are not to mix too much. Marilee learns this when her mother tells her not to spend too much time with Melissa, fearing that she will "'get to smell like a Negro'" (287). Such a comment was not uncommon at the time, but it makes Marilee realize that she "had liked the way Melissa smelled" (287) and instead of making her want to stay away from black people, it encourages her to seek their comforting presence. One smell leading to another, Marilee starts reflecting upon the smell of Melissa's great food;[18] she cannot find anything wrong with the maid but remembers that she once heard her mother tell Melissa "'I don't see why you don't go on back to Tennessee . . . You know you ought to, now, don't you? . . . You aren't fooling anybody. . . . If Miss Eileen—'" (289). Marilee's appearance kept her mother from finishing her sentence, but it serves to pave the way for an important moment in the story when Marilee provides the missing words. Deciding there is no reason why she should not pay an unexpected visit to Sharon, Marilee goes there and ends up spying on her uncle and Melissa. Her discovery does not come completely as a surprise: the two of them are lovers and Marilee understands that Melissa's four children are actually kin to her.

17 As the narrative comes to a close, Marilee has taken sides, she has "crossed over" (289) in more ways than one by biting into "the apple in the garden" (288) and going to Sharon against everyone's advice. Instead of rejecting Melissa the way her mother does, she accepts her and her children—"[t]hat blood was ours, mingling and twining with the other. Mama could kick like a mule, fight like a wildcat in a sack, but she would never get it out. It was there for good" (290). Terry Roberts has noted the pun that is used here and explains that "'for good' means both 'forever' and 'for the benefit of all.' The young Marilee Summerall understands the first of these meanings immediately; it requires the maturity of the older narrator to perceive the second" (*Self* 96). Protecting Marilee from what she perceives as a sin, her mother behaves in such a way that makes Melissa's qualities stand out for her daughter—her cooking, but also her smell which she has confessed to the reader that she likes (287). Marilee can identify the dark other, but she can also place herself more clearly in the vicinity of Sharon. The fact that Marilee's mother is the one who gives away the narrator's identity thus appears as an early hint of the revelation that later unfolds: the mother not only discloses her daughter's name but, by exemplifying the mind of the white South, she also forces Marilee to take a stand and expose her true self to the reader.[19]

18 Commenting upon Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*, Laura Tansley notes that the two books are "centred by a location" and because of that, "[t]he reader's instinct to link up the stories can also be what defines a short story sequence or cycle. Continuing characters or locations as well as themes and patterns create a more tangible link than just themes and patterns, and so would suggest that the piece is to be read as a whole as well as for its composite parts" (38). "Sharon" confirms that in Spencer's case, it is not only place and characters, but also memory, that brings her three stories together: the Marilee series presents a self in conversation with itself.[20] Marilee is the voice behind everything and, ultimately, she is merely writing a composite memoir, as the third story demonstrates.

## "Indian Summer": Questioning Terminologies

19 The last story introduces Uncle Rex, one of Marilee's mother's brothers who "had been wild in youth" (381). This comment serves to introduce an intratextual reference to Foster Hamilton, although Marilee does not name him. Still, Marilee's fascination with Rex seems to be connected to her attraction to Foster: "I had a wild boy friend myself back then and I used to reflect that at least Uncle Rex had married Aunt Martha. Furthermore, he did, at last, settle down" (381). The frustrations expressed in "A Southern Landscape" over Foster's idiocy are clarified with this comment, but Marilee does not take it further—the reader who has understood the reference should come to his/her own conclusion. Later on, Marilee alludes to Foster again, remembering a comment Hernan once made that "the wild boy who had been my first romance could certainly put away a lot of likker" (392). More important is Marilee's understanding of Foster's justification for not visiting more often after their first kiss: in "A Southern Landscape," she remembers him saying "'We'd have been married in two weeks . . . It scared me half to death'" (47). In "Indian Summer," she distances herself more clearly from such a situation and declares: "Let your family know you've seen anybody once or twice and they've already picked out the preacher and decorated the church" (392).[21] This thematic echo confirms that Marilee still resents Foster's attitude. However, in the third story, the focus is obviously no longer on Foster and the subject is quickly put aside. What the connection nonetheless reveals, as noted by Peggy Prenshaw, is that Marilee's "keen interest in members who stray beyond the family's tight control may suggest something of [her] urge to escape" (140).

20 The impression that Spencer never envisioned the three stories as interdependent is further confirmed when Martha refers to Hernan and Melissa. Instead of leaving it up to the reader to fill in the gaps when her aunt interrupts herself realizing the children are around, Marilee clarifies the situation and sums up her uncle's "secret" affair with the black maid: "What she'd started to say was that Uncle Hernan lived with a Negro woman and everybody knew it. It was his young wife's nurse who'd come down from Tennessee with her, nursed her when she got sick and died, then stayed on to keep house" (389). That being said, "Sharon" no longer seems a useful part in the Marilee series as this scandalous revelation is not unique to it. In addition, Marilee makes ironic observations and, when her uncle declares: "'I am glad I never had any children'" (389), she comments to the reader: "[t]hough he'd apparently had any number by Melissa, he didn't have to count them the way Uncle Rex had to count Andrew" (389). Marilee's aside stands in firm contradiction to her conclusion at the end of "Sharon" and leads the reader to believe that she has a public and a private self that are moving in directions that are not necessarily going parallel. From this perspective, the second story gains force and emphasizes the power of an observation made in "Indian Summer" that there is a "wide gap between statements and actions" (388).

21 This becomes even more pertinent as the story unfolds. The story of Rex's mare, which serves to introduce Marilee's uncle as "finely coiled, authentic" (383), includes a comment on the fact that "the beast was female . . . ; that . . . made a difference . . . all along" (384). The reader is led to understand that the central problem is that Rex has never managed to assert his masculinity within his household—his wife owns the place, his son, Andrew, makes decisions about it—and all he turns out to be is a father and

husband who has no direct influence whatsoever on his own environment. Keeping a mare instead of a stallion illustrates his frustration somehow, but, instead of understanding the issues behind his choice, Martha "[raises] Cain about that mare" (385). It is significant that when Rex realizes his powerlessness within his household and decides to leave, he takes the animal with him and goes on to help people he knows will appreciate his efforts. Spencer's selection of names suggestively underlines the assigned function of each character for Rex means king in Latin—though it can only be meant ironically here—while Andrew evokes masculine features in Greek—again in a twisted way since, according to Marilee, in convincing his mother without telling his father about it that selling land to promoters would be lucrative, "[h]e'd gone about it wrong: snatching authority away from his father" (393). Such a conjunction also points the reader in the right direction: before his return, Rex is a king away from home and eventually, he regains his rights, at least on the surface of things—as Uncle Hernan declares at the end of the story, "'Rex did what he had to do. He settled it with those McClellands, once and for all'" (400). What the situation nonetheless suggests is that, ironically, without knowing it, Martha is the one who has power through her ownership of the place, despite her saying that "everything she had belonged to Rex in her way of thinking, that the Lord had made woman subservient to man, it was put forth that way in the Bible" (388). It is because Martha "'wanted [him] on this place . . . and as long as she wants [him] here the only word that goes is [his]'" (400), that Rex has any form of influence on the household.

22 As a result, the episode of the mare gains further significance in the light of the episode that relates Andrew's shady business plans. When he and his mother, who have appeared to Marilee as "thicker than thieves" (386), present Rex with their plan about the land, Rex decides to go away, feeling that since he has no claim to the place, his point of view will not ever matter to them. Focusing on Rex's reaction and the general confusion it creates enables Marilee to distract the reader from the real issue for some time, but, as was the case in the previous stories, she has a significant part to play in the plot she has designed and has a guilty secret to confess. In "A Southern Landscape," it was her failed connection with Foster and her unladylike handling of an awkward situation; in "Sharon," a discovery she felt the urge to share years after she had come across it; and in "Indian Summer," it is her indirect involvement in the series of events that led Rex to leave for a while: "I had once suggested to Andrew . . . that the McClelland place had a gold mine in real estate if only they'd care to develop it, what with the new highway laid out to run along beside it" (390). In order to tone down the part she played, Marilee refers to stereotypes regarding women: "I knew nobody would ever reckon me responsible, simply because I was a girl in business. A girl in business, their assumptions went, was somebody that had no right to be and did not count in thinking or in conversation" (390). Anadiplosis is used here ironically to convince the reader that Marilee cannot be held accountable for the situation—and yet she seems to be more concerned with convincing herself than persuading the reader.

23 Marilee's remorse is apparent, but, as the narrator, she does not edit Andrew's comments when she later confronts him and he tells her: "'It was Mother I was trying to help. She needs something more to interest her than she's got. I thought the real estate idea you had was just about right'" (393). At this stage, Marilee is trying hard to make her cousin see that he should never make plans without informing his father, that there is a right way of doing things. Marilee and Andrew are obviously speaking at cross purposes and they each side with their own part of the family—Marilee with the

Wirths and Andrew with the McClellands. Again, as the narrator, Marilee leaves it up the reader to decide how the content of her story should be interpreted: "The people themselves all tell a different tale, so how can you judge what's true?" (394). When other people's comments may throw a negative light on her, Marilee does not censor them; she lets them voice their opinion and then defends herself if need be. Joe Richard, the man who agreed to help her search for Rex, is very direct upon his return from finding her uncle: "'The next time you have some bright family ideas about real estate . . ., you better count to a hundred-and-two and keep your mouth shut'" (397). Although the story still runs for three more pages, Joe's comment brings everything together and some kind of epiphany comes out—what, in Spencerian aesthetics, might be called, after the story's title, Indian summer. Marilee defines it in her own terms: "There is the long hot summer, heavy and teeming, more real than life; and there is the other summer, pure as gold, as real as hope" (398). With its focus on the summer season, this sentence also introduces an echo with Marilee's family name, Summerall, and intimates that family comes first whether it is "a chosen family" (398), as the one Marilee reflects upon when observing Rex from a distance during his interlude away from home, or a family defined by blood ties, told or untold, as those Marilee finds out about in "Sharon" (290). Terry Roberts notes that throughout her reflections, Marilee is also building her own family of the heart "as she narrates these stories about . . . her own blood family *and* the family she chooses through the act of telling" (*Self* 99). Each subsequent discovery about others helps Marilee appreciate the value of place within her community—when thinking about Rex's temporary relocation, she comes to the conclusion that "if Uncle Rex had wanted to leave forever he would have gone further than twenty miles away; he had the world to choose from, depending on which temperature and landscape he favored" (395). As this "if" sentence makes clear, everything depends on the choices one makes, on the selection one operates—the construction of a composite emerges from a similar concern: what stories to tell and which to discard in order to achieve unity.

24 As Marilee watches Rex from a distance, she understands that "[t]here is such a thing as father, daughter, and grandchild—such a thing as family that is not blood family but a chosen family" (398). These words are reminiscent of her concluding words in "Sharon" though she does not apply them to herself. Seeing that Rex has found himself a new home and a new family makes Marilee see that it is possible to locate family ties beyond those dictated by blood. The portraits she has chosen to draw in the three stories confirm that she has learned this lesson and selected the most important people in her life—those who make up the family of her heart. When Rex returns, he too, has understood something: "'this property [is] all coming to [Andrew] someday'" (399). As Peggy Prenshaw explains, Rex "has reached a compromise between his love of the family and his private desires" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 141); he has come back to tell Andrew that no matter what happens between them, the ties that bind a family cannot be changed: he is his son, Martha is his wife and though it is hard for him, Rex knows the place will never be his. What is essential to "Indian Summer" and to the other Marilee stories is the selection Marilee has made, as each successive story reveals her identity and her family values.

25 In her preface to *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, Spencer explains that she started writing stories at a moment in her life when she felt estranged, far from her native South: "My experience was now broken into pieces, no less valid, perhaps no less interesting—perhaps even more relevant, I was tempted to speculate, to the restless life

of the world? Short stories seemed a better way to get at this sort of thing than novels, at least, a better way to start" (x). Understanding the importance of fragments meant to mirror her own experience is central to grasp Spencer's relationship with short forms—her memoir, very much like the Marilee stories, is made up of fragments, scenes from her life that are also built like echo chambers and could be taken as another kind of composite. In *The American Short Story Cycle*, Jennifer J. Smith maintains that

> [t]he form of the cycle enables the expression of identity without fixity . . . that is, flexible, dynamic identities that emerge within a story or series of stories but which are neither rigidly defined nor fixed. Reflecting the conflicts between autonomy and belonging, such constructions allow stories to assert a momentary, contingent sense of a character's self without insisting that it remains so across the stories. (7)

26 The Marilee composite illustrates such ideas in that it presents various steps in the narrator's growth and understanding of her world: the issue of race, the status of women, the meaning of community and the importance of place which somehow helps to stabilize the self. In the three stories, as Smith suggests when discussing cycles, "selfhood develops not out of autonomy and sustained realization but from interconnectedness" (8) because Marilee establishes herself within a web of relationships that she observes or emulates. In an undated draft, Marilee remembers her Uncle Hernan and explains:

> I don't like to talk about Uncle Hernan's dying! It was a shock to all of us. When I think about it I know the truth is, I don't know how I feel about death. In so many ways he's still there. I dream of him, and will, all the rest of my life, I hope. We are sitting some where (sic.), talking together, and I hear everything and exchange ideas. Then I wake up, feeling warm and full of love. We all loved him, but Melissa was the worst.

27 This fragment makes Marilee's goal in telling her stories clearer: like so many Southerners, she resorts to storytelling to keep the past alive, to keep the loved ones present, and her voice, which haunted Elizabeth Spencer for so long, conjures up ghosts of another time that make each passing day, possibly, more bearable. The reason Spencer decided to give up this other story, centered on Melissa, might simply be that Melissa was never that close to Marilee and it would have led her to explore the race question in a more forward way than she had done in the three published stories—but Melissa, after all, is another voice at the back door, and Spencer readers know where such reflections may lead.

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28 In the first part of an essay rooted in Deleuzian theory, Camille Dumoulié reasserts the fact that the short story revolves around one main event. For him, it is "the mode *par excellence* of the event that is always past, though its effect is forever still to come" (90, my translation). Spencer's Marilee stories, though narrated by a single character, are independent pieces; they hardly ever include references to each other and each revolves around one single event that the reader has not previously been prepared for. As a consequence, they illustrate Spencer's theory that some of her most successful short stories are "really tiny novels in disguise" ("Elizabeth Spencer," interview with Tolliver 4). Taken together, they are not stronger than they are individually, but Marilee's touch is there and her presence in strategic places in the collections where her stories appear gives the illusion that the reader is meeting an old friend, her/his personal guide in Spencer country. Spencer has compared the act of writing to

traveling, saying that "Each day now, I find myself like a lonely traveler at a crossroads, standing and asking, Which way? Which way? Finally you have to choose one and keep moving" ("An Interview" 344). Just like the reader, Spencer is guided by a voice that tells her which way to go: whether it is an inner voice or that of an individual, it accompanies her along the worn paths of the South, but also on those she has journeyed down in Italy and Canada. Movement is a driving metaphor which accounts for Spencer's desire not to fix Marilee in the restricted space of a collection—she is more at ease seeing her appear and disappear again, her stories being signposts in that strange land called the South.

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## NOTES

**1.** Faulkner in a letter to Joan Williams, 8 January 1953 (*Selected Letters* 345). At the University of Virginia, he declared: "In a short story that's next to the poem, almost every word has got to be almost exactly right" (*Faulkner in the University* 207).

**2.** Some critics' preferred term, as introduced by Robert M. Luscher when referring to "a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme. Within the context of the sequence, each short story is thus not a completely closed formal experience" (148).

**3.** See Ferguson. Charles Dickens is one famous example and his careful attention to detail in handling the publication of his novels is largely documented. In 2011, Cambridge University Press published *The Serialization of* Great Expectations*: From* All the Year Round, making it possible for readers to see how Dickens revised or manipulated his text to turn the fragments into the coherent volume he had already envisioned.

**4.** Ford only kept the short format in *Let me be Frank with You* (2014), which is made up of four previously unpublished novellas. The three novels, as Marie-Agnès Gay observes, follow an episodic formula—she calls it "une forme romanesque à épisodes" (179).

**5.** Joanne V. Creighton had explored that same path in her 1970 dissertation, part of which was published as *William Faulkner's Craft of Revision:* The Snopes Trilogy*, "The Unvanquished" and "Go Down, Moses"* in 1977. For her, in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner was "attempting to create a new synthetic form, the short story composite, in which the stories are autonomous units governed by their own principles while they are at the same time integral parts of a larger whole" (86).

**6.** In 2009, Spencer wrote "I did think of writing more stories about [Marilee] but none came to me strongly, so it remained an idea" (Personal correspondence with Gérald Préher, December 24, 2009).

**7.** Elizabeth Spencer, "Works: *Marilee*," available on <http://www.elizabethspencerwriter.com / works/marilee.htm> (13/05/2014).

**8.** The first two Edward Glenn stories receive a different treatment in *The Southern Woman: New and Selected Fiction* as they appear back to back—but the chronological order of publication is not respected. "The Master of Shongalo" (1995) appears before "The Runaways" (1994), even though Spencer feels that as far as the plot is concerned "The Runaways" should come first. The last story devoted to Edward Glenn, "Return Trip," first published in 2009 and included in *Starting Over*, should come second (See Préher).

**9.** In her foreword to *Marilee*, Spencer writes: "I had just been thinking about Mississippi towns, some I'd never been to, which were just pretty names, like Laurel, Hazelhurst and Crystal Springs, and others like Port Gibson and Vicksburg, which I knew slightly from the occasional visit" (6-7).

**10.** A reference to "the northern bank of Lake Ontario" in "A Southern Landscape" suggests that Canada might well have been the "far away" place where Marilee lived at the time she started reflecting upon her years in Mississippi. See Spencer, "A Southern Landscape" (43).

**11.** See Roberts, "Landscapes of the Mind" and Spencer, "The outer landscape" (10).

**12.** See the chapter devoted to titles in Genette, *Seuils* 59-106.

**13.** *Landscapes of the Heart* reads like an assemblage of memories rather than an actual memoir. Two of the sections, "A Christian Education" and "The Day Before," were initially published as short stories.

**14.** Place is "certified," as Binx Bolling puts it in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, when its existence is universally acknowledged through various media that make it known outside its boundaries. In "A Southern Landscape," the newspaper is the first medium but Marilee also refers to the way Port Claiborne is featured in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*.

**15.** "I would cross a shoulder of pasture. . ."; "I would go up the steps . . ." (284); "after dinner, I would sit with him . . ." (287).

**16.** It is, incidentally, an "innocent remark" (289) about Melissa that infuriates Marilee's mother at one point in the story. Marilee is sent to her room for a reason she will later understand.

**17.** "you could tell she had copied all her tastes from Aunt Eileen" (286).

**18.** The way Marilee structures her memories has an incantatory quality: she uses anaphora and somehow makes the past come back into the present like waves onto a dry shore (see 287).

**19.** Marilee does not appear to have shared her discovery with anyone else; the story thus functions as "a continuation of the world around [her]," to use Hernan's definition of literature (287).

**20.** In an article on "The Southern Autobiographical Impulse," J. Bill Berry explains that the "southern personal narrative is a conversation, often heated, within the self, between the self and the community, between the South and the country, and with those outsiders within, the other race" (13-14). "Sharon," though it is fiction, exemplifies such a trend and reads like an autobiographical sketch.

**21.** Marilee is trying to explain her father's reference to Joe Richard, a man who is interested in her.

## ABSTRACTS

En tant que genre, la nouvelle a souvent été comparée à la poésie et au roman. Néanmoins, un certain nombre de nouvellistes ont trouvé le moyen d'utiliser leur talent et de présenter des récits qui, une fois réunis, donnent l'impression de former une sorte de récit complet et peuvent donc se situer à la croisée des deux genres. Elizabeth Spencer a publié deux séries de nouvelles : l'une consacrée au personnage de Marilee, l'autre à celui d'Edward. Cet article porte sur les récits de Marilee : "A Southern Landscape", "Sharon" et "Indian Summer". Ces trois histoires constituent un groupe composite de nouvelles et Spencer l'a commenté à plusieurs reprises. Cette contribution montre que la connaissance d'un ensemble de personnages par le lecteur au moment où il s'engage dans la lecture des deuxième et troisième histoires en fait une expérience participative. L'intérêt des trois histoires réside également dans l'idée du passage d'un lieu à un autre, d'un temps à un autre, puisque le personnage éponyme, tout comme Spencer à l'époque où elle écrivait ces textes, est originaire du Mississippi et vit désormais loin de là.

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